Contradiction, transcendence, and subjectivity in Derrida's ethics

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"Ethics in Derrida requires an affirmation of friendship and hospitality on the basis that I always have something outside myself inside myself, so affirmation of self requires affirmation of others. Ethics cannot be absolutist." Barry Stocker, author of a new reader on Derrida, discusses Derrida's ethical philosophy and its indebtedness to Kierkegaard, Levinas, and J. L. Austin.

Derrida’s ethics, like his philosophy as a whole, is not presented in a very systematic form. It was not Derrida’s approach to write essays or treatises that present a view on some main topic in philosophy. His philosophy emerges from discussion of texts by others, where various references and themes are interwoven. Derrida had good reasons for not writing in that way himself. He had an interpretative approach based on close reading of texts with regard to questions of original meaning and context on one side; the ambiguities and contradictions of the text on the other side. He explains this approach well in a paper on ethics he gave in Istanbul in 1997, “Hostipitalité”, [1] (Derrida 1999), co-translated by the present author into English as “Hostipitality”. [2] He refers to “a critical crossroads of semantic (or, if you prefer, etymologico-institutional) filiations and an aporetic crossroads or a sort of double postulation, contradictory double moment, double constraint or double bind” (Derrida 2000, 12). [3] This is a version of the two kinds of deconstruction, or interpretation, that Derrida discussed on various occasions. The semantic or etymologico-institutional aspect refers to Heidegger in his appeal to etymology and his search, or nostalgia, for Being. It also refers to the role of nature in Rousseau and the kind of Philosophical Phenomenology which rests on ahistorical transcendence. The aporetic refers to Nietzsche’s celebration of difference, force and the anti-transcendental along with the interpretation of interpretation in Michel de Montaigne and the ambiguities of a literary description of a historical reality. The second pole is affirmative as in the yes-saying of Nietzsche and the double “yes” in the last chapter of Joyce’s Ulysses. The first pole is more negative in its rejection of the empirical in order to find some unifying point of transcendence, though always with regard to the impossibility of the pure presence of a pure presence unaffected by representation, repetition and difference. Derrida’s ethical position is established through the duality of his deconstructive philosophy. The duality leans towards the second pole, but neither can be eliminated from a presence in each other or in any interpretative work.
“Hostipitality” itself contains ethical discussion in the context of Kant’s philosophy and the literature of Pierre Klossowski, and an etymological discussion. The concern with “Hospitality” comes from Kant in the context of his republican political philosophy. A large part of Derrida’s ethics deals with hospitality and with the friend. In both cases, ethical concerns are discussed in relation to political community. Hospitality is a question of how we treat immigrants and refugees in the current political context. In Kant’s own texts the concern is with colonialism. Kant refers to colonialism as what abuses laws of hospitality, because the colonialisat goes beyond the right of a guest in a foreign land in imposing sovereignty on a conquered people. Friendship in classical and early modern thinkers raises issues of the friendship between citizens that is part of a political community. These are republican issues, that is issues of what integrates citizens into a political community and what denies political rights to individuals who wish to be part of a community.

The exploration of hospitality in “Hostipitality” goes together with a discussion of literature, in the case of Klossowski as it shows ambiguity in the notion of a host, because the host only shows hospitality by defining the guest as someone who doesn’t belong, who is someone other than the host and proprietor. Etymology shows the relationship between host and hostility, reinforcing the idea of the hospitality that necessarily defines the guest as Other. That otherness can always be the otherness of the enemy who threatens the host.

In typical Derridean fashion, the hospitality is shown to be a necessary impossibility resting on a contradiction that can never be eliminated or resolved. The contradiction is approached in the affirmative in a double yes-saying which negates the enmity and the constitutive opposition between hospitality and enmity, in which the difference can become the opposition of enmity.

What is the context in Derrida’s thought as a whole? A long early discussion of ethical themes appears in the 1964 essay “Violence and Metaphysics”, [4] which is a response to the work of Emmanuel Lévinas. Lévinas argued that ethics is first philosophy and supported this with a phenomenology in which the same (the “I”) can only exist in relation to its own transcendence. There must be exteriority for there to be a world of phenomena. The phenomena within consciousness depend on the infinite possibilities for the phenomenological contents of consciousness. The infinite must be other in relation to the finite contents of consciousness at any one moment. The interior consciousness described by phenomenology rests on the exteriority of infinity. That infinity is concrete in our consciousness as the face of the Other. My consciousness contains alterity, what is other than its purely internal contents, and that is grasped in the experience of consciousness in awareness of the face of the Other, which we cannot eliminate without self-destruction.

Derrida both takes from Lévinas and rejects much. Lévinas’ emphasis on non-violence towards the Other is a form of violence on the “same” because there can only be consciousness of the Other in separation from the Other, which is a force directed against the Other. Denial of that force must be violent itself, undermining any claim Lévinas has to a purely non-violent ethical position. Derrida does agree that the Other is always already there, though he tends to emphasise language rather than description of consciousness favoured in Lévinas’ phenomenology. Language can never be completely
internal. It always has external origins and as it is only language if it communicates with the Other; it must contain the Other to whom messages are directed within itself.

That establishes two ethical claims for Derrida. Firstly, an absolutely ethical position is violence against violence and therefore cannot be purely ethical. There is no pure or absolute ethics. Secondly, ethics can never be absent because I am always in relation with an Other. Consciousness cannot be constituted, even in its most apparently inner aspects, without the presence of something outside its immediate presence. That can be expressed in non-ethical terms, as in the presence of memory as what disrupts the idea that present consciousness can be completely present to itself in one isolated moment. Even when we think of memory, we have confirmation that I am always concerned with something outside myself of that moment, which is an ethical concern. Although Derrida only cites Kierkegaard briefly on this issue, [5] he seems close to arguments in Fear and Trembling [6], Either/Or [7], and The Concept of Anxiety [8], according to which any claims I have to be ethical do not rest on my obligation to moral law, but on the need to integrate a self divided between its immediate self and its self over time. The self requires an absolute relation with itself as the absolute in which it has to recognise primary relations with something other than itself. There are also some parallel arguments in the contemporary Utilitarian philosopher Derek Parfit. [9] In Reasons and Persons [10], Parfit argues that my obligation to others cannot be any weaker than my obligation to myself since my self at a future time will be a different self from my present self. Parfit leaves the discontinuous self as it is, in both Kierkegaard and Derrida there is a sense of integrating the other self with the immediate self in order to have a recognisable self of any kind. Like Parfit, they see a relation between the question of ethical relations with others and my sense of connection with different versions of myself. There must be a pre-ethical sense that my self is connected with, and is dependent on, other selves, including other states of myself in order for there to be ethics. In that case, the pre-ethical relation is already ethical, as Lévinas suggests. This is circularity but Derrida regarded both circularity and contradiction as unavoidable. It is metaphysics that attempts to deny circularity and contradiction in order to create a transcendental unity, which negates empirical diversity. Derrida writes explicitly on Kierkegaard in The Gift of Death, [11] but the present author finds that less successful than the implicit use of Kierkegaard in earlier texts on Phenomenology, Speech and Phenomena, [12] as well as “Violence and Metaphysics”, where Kierkegaard is mentioned but not analysed.

In another early text, Of Grammatology, [13] Derrida refers to the claims of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Claude Levi-Strauss that the state of nature is a non-violent state. In “Genesis and Structure of The Essay on the Origin of Languages”, chapter three of Part Two, Derrida examines pity and nature in Rousseau. Rousseau presumes that natural man has a pity for suffering in other individuals which lessens in society. Pity is natural morality, corrupted by society. In The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Rousseau refers to the role of imagination in social man as what leads to imagining what others are thinking of me and wishing to appear better than they are in their imagination and in mine. The important issue for Derrida is that imagination in Rousseau, and historical-written consciousness in Lévi-Strauss disturb internal consciousness. I go outside myself within my own consciousness in order to imagine what others are thinking or to be aware of historical context, or to leave signs which are not immediate expressions on internal consciousness. For Derrida this is a nostalgia for what never was. If there is memory there is historical memory. If there is language there is writing. If there is consciousness
there is imagination. Rousseau’s own descriptions of natural pity rely in practice on a supplement which has a non-natural origin and stands in for nature. In the section “The Present Debate: The Economy of Pity”, Derrida points out that natural pity in Rousseau rests on a maternal voice and a law written in the heart. The relation with the mother is a social and external relation. The writing in the heart is the non-immediate event of writing and of law, they most be non-immediate because writing and the law are both permanent and are both autonomous of inner intentional origins. Pity itself in Rousseau is secondary to love of self, and is therefore less natural and more social than self-love. Rousseau imagines natural man to be self-contained, which undermines, as Derrida suggests, the idea that pity is natural. Derrida points to Rousseau’s general fascination with self-containment, which can be found in both The Social Contract and The Discourse on the Origins of Inequality. That is a version of Plato’s metaphysics which rests on the interiority of the soul in opposition to anything that is external to the soul. That gesture is repeated in Husserl’s Phenomenology.

For Derrida, we must exist outside ourselves in exteriority. Language, even in my inner most thoughts, is what is concerned with communication. The language I think in must acknowledge the presence of some thing external in my consciousness. Pure interiority simply does not exist. The Platonic emphasis of internality over externality includes the opposition of good and evil. Derrida does not discuss these terms much, but he implicitly rejects any ethics based on the absolute opposition of good and evil. In his particularly elliptical text, “Envois”, [14] Derrida refers to another aspect of Plato, the Philebus which does not start with Platonic absoluteness. It is an investigation of pleasure as the goal of morality. Plato himself shows the problems with attempts to measure the maximisation of pleasure. The pleasure cannot just be immediate; it involves memory and repetition. I can only be guided by pleasure if I remember pleasures and repeat them. In that case the pursuit of immediate pleasure itself becomes abstract and systematic. Plato uses that argument to justify his moral absolutism and rationalism on the basis that all definitions of pleasure-oriented morality must contradict themselves.

The discussion of friendship in Politics of Friendship [15] rests heavily on Aristotle. In his reading of Aristotle, Derrida finds contradiction in the nature of friendship, since friendship must restrict itself ideally to only one person, or that would be the highest friendship. The highest friendship also requires me to wish my friend could become a god, in which case my friend would not need me and we could not be friends.

Ethics in Derrida requires an affirmation of friendship and hospitality on the basis that I always have something outside myself inside myself, so affirmation of self requires affirmation of others. Ethics cannot be absolutist. Extreme hedonism undermines itself because it must adopt abstract principles. Ethics must allow the Other to be distinct and different from me. I do not try to drag the Other into a relationship of indebtedness to myself in showing pity. What Derrida also emphasises is the gift, the ethical act that is unjustified and does not require an equivalent in return. He dealt with this at some length in Given Time. [16] The issues already appear in “Violence and Metaphysics” in the priority of the Other. One of Derrida’s references in Given Time, the work on the gift of the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, had already been cited by Lévinas in Totality and Infinity. [17] “Violence and Metaphysics” is largely a discussion of Totality and Infinity. Another essay in Writing and Difference, “From Restricted to General Economy”, is a reading of Hegel with reference to “absolute expenditure” in Georges Bataille, that is
expenditure without return. This theme in Bataille was worked out by him in relation to anthropological ideas on potlatch, that is gifts as symbols of social power.

There is also a regulative Kantian aspect of ethics for Derrida, that is the pursuit of pure obedience to law, which we can never satisfy but should strive to follow. Hospitality and friendship are absolute calls on us, but they are always tied up with hostility and with the enemy. We have to follow not an abstract set of principles but our concrete relations with concrete others in ethics. The complete fulfilment is not possible. That would be an apocalyptic end of humanity for Derrida, in the breakdown of separation between individuals. We should pursue certain obligations but we should also hope they never become completely realised. Ethics is everywhere and it is impossible.

There is a more pragmatic sense of ethics when Derrida invokes J. L. Austin’s philosophy of language. Derrida developed a commentary on Austin in the 1971 paper “Signature Event Context”. [18] Other remarks on Austin can be found in a more allusive manner in Glas [19] and “Envois”. [20] Austin was concerned with the pragmatics of language in which he thought the opposition between true and false cannot be absolute. That claim anticipates Derrida as do the claims that meaning occurs in a context of use and that language contains force in the non-linguistic world. Austin expressed the last claim in the idea of the performative or the perlocutionary in language, which is where language brings something about in the world. It is important for Derrida that Austin recognises the legal and ethical aspects of language and that he takes language as a kind of social contract in which language contains a promise to communicate a meaning. Derrida draws conclusions that go beyond Austin though, in that he claims there is no context that can fix the meaning of a linguistic item. The context principle for fixing meaning taken to its logical conclusion should mean that every context requires a context, and so on ad infinitum. Here the apocalyptic enters Derrida’s thought again since the performative clarifies the way in which meaning has effects in the world. The arrival of complete meaning in communication must have an apocalyptic effect in the world in the performative aspects of language. The pragmatic and the apocalyptic occur together. In that case, there is no simple harmonisation of Pragmatism and an ethics without absolute foundations. Hilary Putnam, in Ethics without Ontology, [21] argues for a Pragmatic approach to ethics with no absolutes, so that context of some kind is always invoked in making ethical judgements. The argument partly takes place through a reading of Lévinas, despite which Putnam is very dismissive of Derrida. There is an absoluteness in Lévinas’s position, discussed by Derrida. Derrida resists the absolutism, but as always constitutes the philosophical and linguistic field of the concepts as caught between empirical variation and the necessity of transcendental rules which raise the possibility of apocalypse in the attempt to apply transcendental rules to variable empirical reality. Richard Rorty makes a more general attempt to harmonise Pragmatism and aspects of anti-metaphysical European Philosophy in Consequences of Pragmatism. [22] Rorty recognises that there are transcendental aspects in Derrida, but does not reaches the necessary conclusions about the status of two broad fields of anti-metaphysical philosophy: pragmatism and the philosophy which comes out of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

Ethical principles are transcendental in Derrida, but he recognises the violence of transcendence, the necessity to contest the transcendental from the point of view of the empirical, the destructive effects of an ethics of good opposed to evil or the absolute
application of good. There is an equivocation in Derrida between the ethical absolute as a Kantian regulative ideal that can never be realised and the limitless empirical variations of ethical situations. The resolution must come through the theories of subjectivity which Derrida regards favourably in Kierkegaard along with Freud and Nietzsche.

Footnotes


9. Anthony Rudd suggests a comparison between Kierkegaard and Parfit in Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical (Rudd 1993).


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